

Guantanamo Is Restless

By Ted Sell

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U.S. NAVAL BASE, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba—Rear Adm. James B. Hildreth went on base television recently to announce that henceforth the lowest three enlisted ranks could wear civilian clothes off-duty. Cheers burst from the enlisted men's barracks.

In the harbor, a tug returned from escorting a Russian freighter through the giant naval base. The Soviet vessel, loaded with sugar, had sailed from the Cuban port at the head of the bay.

On the base athletic field, the top-ranked Marine barracks football team suffered an intramural defeat.

As evening drew near, heav-

ily-armed Marines, three to a position, began their night watch from 38 sandbagged guard posts behind the 17.4-mile long chain-link fence that separates the U.S. base from Fidel Castro's Communist Cuba.

It was another routine 24 hours for this sunbaked, cactus-studded American outpost, the only U.S. base in a Communist country.

Despite past harassment by Cuba (U.S. civilians have been evacuated twice this decade), life at Guantanamo goes serenely on at the officers clubs, the recreations centers, the cinderblock homes of officers and men, and on the docks where U.S. destroyers bob lazily.

The likelihood of a Castro attack has diminished in recent months. Long gone seem the days, early in Castro's regime, when he threatened almost daily to oust the Yankee "interlopers" from the base they occupy under a 1903 treaty with a pre-Communist government.

For Castro has mitigated his virulent anti-Americanism. So much so that Cuban radio stations now broadcast American

songs, something unheard of not long ago.

For months there have been no instances of harassment along the fence where once Cuban militiamen, from their side of the barrier, gleefully hurled rocks onto the metal roofs of guardhouses to keep American guards awake—and whence Cuban soldiers tried to infiltrate Guantanamo and were, on occasion, fired upon.

Why does the United States

on Edge of Communism

set such great store by Guantanamo? America probably would insist upon holding onto the base now for reasons of pride alone, but military men say that is not the big reason.

What matters to them is the unparalleled fleet training facilities Guantanamo affords, facilities which the Navy considers important enough to fight for, if necessary.

"Nowhere else does the Atlantic Fleet have such an ideal combination of sea, air and climate conditions," says Adm. Hildreth, base commander.

Guantanamo is a pyramidal maze of commands—a naval air station, a naval station, fleet training group, public works center, Marine barracks and others. As commander of the naval base, Hildreth sits at the top of the pyramid.

About 300 persons still commute daily from Communist Cuba to work at Guantanamo. Another 400 Cubans who fled Castro live permanently on the base in civilian housing areas. Before Castro, 2400 Cubans worked on the base.

Castro has made it difficult for those still working but their earned dollars are important in his foreign exchange picture.

Many of the workers spend up to three hours a day commuting. Cuban buses bring them to a border station out of sight beyond a hill about two-thirds of a mile from the U.S. gate. Then they must walk through a chain-link fence-enclosed "cattle chute" over the hill, into a valley, and through the U.S. gate, where American buses wait to take them to their shops and offices.